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Men's emotions and support needs in relation to infertility

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Introduction

Men have been somewhat overlooked within social science research around reproduction (Culley, Hudson and Lohan, 2013), and particularly around their emotions and support needs when they are facing infertility (either their own or partner's diagnosis of infertility). Given that women are more likely to experience treatments for fertility and medical interventions for assisted conception much more directly than men, the dominant focus on women in relation to infertility is understandable. Men, however, are not 'unbothered' by the experience of infertility, counter to what some research has previously suggested (Lloyd, 1996). Men may also have specific support needs, such as around how they best support their partners; indeed, some of the previous research has suggested that men feel their primary role within the context of infertility to be supporting their partners (Malik and Coulson, 2008). They feel this support role is about them being the 'sturdy oak' or 'rock' for their female partners (Shirani and Henwood, 2011; Throsby and Gill, 2004). However, being the 'rock' can be a burdensome experience, and can often lead to men's own needs for support being overlooked. This is particularly important as other evidence suggests that men may be more likely to confide, share and talk about personal and sensitive aspects of their lives with their wives or partners, rather than friends. Therefore, in the process of supporting their partners within the context of infertility, men have the potential to feel isolated or unable to share their feelings with the one person they would normally talk to.

Our recent research has explored how men use online spaces as a way of sharing and displaying their emotions around infertility, and how they seek support from other men within such online contexts (Hanna and Gough, 2016a; 2016b). Seeking help and advice for health related issues online is a growing phenomenon, and men are increasingly using online forums or discussion boards to seek help for a variety of sensitive health issues (such as depression, eating disorders, body image). The anonymity that online spaces provide can be useful for encouraging men to share around personal issues, and this appears to be true of the experiences of men with infertility. For our research we examined a men-only online forum, where men could share their stories with other men directly, providing a unique setting for us to analyse man-to-man engagement about the topic of infertility. Whilst the research is limited by the use of online spaces, in that it does not tell us much about men who do not use forums to discuss infertility, it does offer us some useful insights into how men express their feelings around infertility and the type of support men may need when facing infertility within their relationships.

Men's emotions around infertility

Men on the forum we examined described strong feelings around infertility, seeing it as a distressing and pervasive experience within their lives. Beyond the sadness many felt about their situations, they also presented a myriad of feelings that had come about for them as a result of being unable to get pregnant. Friends or family being able to conceive seemingly effortlessly often induced mixed emotions - happiness, anger and jealousy. This range of feelings was captured in a common phrase: were part an 'emotional rollercoaster'. As one man noted: *'They call this IVF thing a rollercoaster ride but ... but it's just so hideous, isn't it?'* The rollercoaster metaphor also conveyed the lack of control men experienced in relation to infertility.

As a result of this 'rollercoaster' experience, men depicted infertility as tyrannical within their lives. It ruled their lives in practical ways such as in terms of clinical appointments and the finances for funding fertility treatment, but also in other more emotional ways. Men described feeling 'stuck' by infertility; they could not move on to what they saw as the next stage of their lives i.e. becoming parents. As one man put it *'It's so difficult to remain positive when life is so much on hold'*. This chimes with other research which talks about difficulties in achieving conception as disrupting the life plans that people have (Shirani and Henwood 2011). Even for men who achieved pregnancy as a result of fertility treatment, the seeming sense of infertility ruling their lives did not stop with a positive pregnancy test. Some of the men discussed the differences between an 'infertility pregnancy' and a 'normal pregnancy' (i.e. conceived naturally) and many of the men felt they could not get excited about pregnancy and their child's arrival until the third trimester as so much had 'gone wrong' up to that point that they were almost braced for disappointment again.

The support that men valued

Men on the forum all spoke of how glad they were to have found a space with 'other men' where they could share safely with one another. Many of the men discussed how their wives or partners had found lots of forums, made friends with other women who were experiencing infertility and derived comfort from these spaces. The men expressed confusion that there were not more spaces for men to share as well as frustration at posting on men's boards within other general forums and getting replies from women to their posts. Women were seen to be able to access more support and attention when it came to infertility, and whilst the men talked about how their female partners were feeling the physical experience of fertility treatments more directly and that they understood why the focus was on the women's bodies, they did often describe feeling pushed out, or overlooked by others, including clinicians.

Many of the men talked about the value of getting other men's advice on the forum, particularly around how to support their partners in relation to emotional or mood side effects that women may experience during hormonal stimulation in fertility treatment. They also sought advice about how other men felt about having to use donor sperm or eggs to achieve pregnancy, or around the value of seeking counselling with their partners to help them manage the stress and distress that infertility was causing them and their relationships. The men's posts often highlighted the value of finding other men who 'got it', while friends and family who had not experienced difficulties in conception were regarded as a poor source of comfort or advice. *As one of our men posted: 'I have been feeling pretty down about the whole thing and really wanted to find somewhere to chat with other people who had been through it all as you do end up feeling like there isn't anyone you can talk to'*. Being able to share with other men, and specifically other men who were 'living' the infertility experience, was seen as really important for both regular and new contributors to the forum.

What can we then learn from forums?

Our analysis of forum posts demonstrates that men do have support needs around infertility, and are looking for advice to help with managing the challenges that not being able to achieve conception can bring up. That men contrasted how seemingly easy it was for women to find support from other women online was interesting, and showed that some men are actively looking for support and to connect with other men for advice. Forums are perhaps useful spaces because they are 'open' all the time and can be accessed from a variety of locations. Men on the forum we looked at did seem quite happy to share often very intimate stories and feelings about infertility with peers, perhaps making

use of the anonymous nature of the forum, as well as potentially feeling reassured that other men would understand if they had been through similar experiences themselves.

Going online for support or advice will not be possible or desirable for all men experiencing infertility however, but some of the points may translate to other settings. Men may often have emotions or experiences they need to talk about, yet may not have someone beyond their partner who they can discuss these personal and sensitive aspects of their lives with. Given that stigma around infertility is still seen as prominent (Barnes, 2014; Nuffield, 2015) men may be reluctant to share their experiences with friends, family or colleagues. Enabling men to speak with others who understand, whether that's in peer support group or individual counselling settings, may then be important. Men may value men-only spaces (virtually or in real life), and approaches which use language which appeals to men to encourage them to find help and advice. Signposting men to appropriate male-friendly options for support, including for forums or resources online, may be needed more often within general practice and fertility clinics. We also need to know more from men themselves who have been or are going through the fertility treatment experience about what they would like in terms of information, support and guidance. Ensuring that men are well supported can perhaps be a good way for ensuring that both partners are able to weather the storm that infertility can bring to relationships. Thus investing time and effort into think about male friendly approaches to support can ultimately be valuable to both men and women.

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